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FIDELITY TO THE DEAD

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FIDELITY TO THE DEAD.

A Sermon

PREACHED

AT THE NEW SYNAGOGUE

ON

שק׳ פ׳ בשלח, *FEBRUARY 9th*, 5655—1895.

BY THE

REV. DR. ADLER,

CHIEF RABBI.

Printed by Request.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY WERTHEIMER, LEA & CO.,
CIRCUS PLACE, LONDON WALL.

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FIDELITY TO THE DEAD.

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־עַצְמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ כִּי הַשְׁבֵּעַ הִשְׁבִּיעַ
אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פָּקֹד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם
וְהַעֲלִיתֶם אֶת־עַצְמֹתַי מִזֶּה אִתְּכֶם :

"And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him : for he had straitly sworn the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you ; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you."—*Exodus* xiii. 19.

THE triumph of a victorious general was celebrated in ancient Rome by a pageant of great pomp and gorgeous splendour. There were to be seen trains of carriages laden with spoils taken from the conquered nation, gold and silver, arms and weapons, statues, pictures, vases, precious stones, elaborately wrought and richly embroidered stuffs, every object which could be regarded as valuable or curious. There followed bands of captives in fetters, the white bulls destined for sacrifice with gilded horns. And then there appeared the general, attired in a gold embroidered robe, and flowered tunic, sceptre in hand, his brow encircled

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with a wreath of laurel, seated in a state chariot drawn by richly caparisoned horses. A slave stood behind him, holding a jewelled crown over his head. The whole body of infantry followed in marching order, their spears adorned with laurel, shouting hymns of victory, singing the praises of their great leader.

The time had come when Israel would have been justified in celebrating such an imposing triumph. The stubbornness of Pharaoh had, at last, been broken; the Egyptians could no longer lord it over them. The children of Israel had quitted the land of oppression with a high hand. They also might hold aloft the rich spoils they had gathered, the vessels of silver and of gold which their former masters willingly gave unto them as a recompense for the severe toil they had so long endured. They also, no doubt, felt impelled to vaunt the wisdom and heroism of their great leader. But we hear naught of all this. One trophy only is borne in this joyful march. As our text verse has it: "And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him: for he had straitly sworn the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you."

The Talmud comments upon this verse as follows:* "Come and learn from this act, how dear was the fulfilment of duty unto Moses our

* Sotah, p. 13.

teacher. All Israel were engaged in the collection of treasure, but Moses bethought himself to carry out the last dying wish to which Joseph had given utterance hundreds of years before. Joseph had now been dead for two centuries. But during all these years the tradition of his dying charge had been faithfully preserved. And in the hour of greatest exultation, when the desire of his life had been realised, when his beloved people had at last been set free, Moses rejoices in being able to carry out this death-bed injunction, proving in this, as he did in all the other acts of his life, that the maxim of the sage king truly applied to him, חֲכַם לֵב יִקַּח מִצְוֹת (Proverbs x. 8), that "he who is wise in heart, he that is truly pious and virtuous, willingly receives Commandments," and rejoices in the fulfilment of duty. He proves his anxiety to walk in the ways of the Lord, who "keepeth faithfulness unto those who sleep in the dust."

With what a wealth of admonition is this action of our great teacher charged! Oh that we would learn from his example to practise faithfulness to the dead, faithfulness to their memory, their example, their strivings and their hopes!

Happily Israel has never been entirely failing in such loyalty. Fidelity to the dead has prompted the reverence which the Israelite entertains for the hallowed soil wherein the remains of our dear kinsfolk are enshrined. It has given rise to the

various observances prescribed for the time of mourning, the period of the שִׁבְעָה, the seven days during which we withdraw from our ordinary avocations, the שְׁלֹשִׁים, the thirty days and the twelve months during which we keep aloof from every vain distraction, the *Jahrzeit*, the anniversary of death, and the הַזְכָּרַת נְשָׁמוֹת, when on the latter days of our festivals and on the Day of Atonement we lovingly remember our departed. We then recall, with fervent gratitude, the memory of our beloved parents, and of our dear kinsfolk who have gone to their eternal rest, all that they have done, all that they have suffered for us, the wealth of affectionate care and solicitude they lavished upon us. And as we thus dwell upon their words and actions, their memory is revived within our hearts.

> And the idea of their life does sweetly creep
> Into our study of imagination,
> And every lovely organ of their life
> Does come apparelled in more precious habit,
> More moving, delicate and full of life,
> Into the eye and prospect of our souls,
> Than when they lived indeed.

I have led your thoughts into this groove, for I desire to pay my tribute of friendship to the memory of your lamented Minister and Secretary. I can bear emphatic testimony to the zeal and fidelity with which he served this congregation. He dearly loved this Synagogue and strove

earnestly for its success. The loss of a member was a personal concern, the gain of a new seat-holder a personal joy to him. How staunch and loyal was he in his friendships, ever frank, fearless and outspoken! How resignedly did he bear the sufferings that shortened his life! On his death-bed he loved to hold converse touching the welfare of the place of worship in whose precincts he dwelt, touching the fortunes of the community to which he was so deeply attached, thus proving that

> To the latest breath
> He felt his ruling passion strong in death.

May God remember his actions for good, and bind up his soul in the bond of life!

But I would ask you, dear congregants, to testify your regard for this zealous servant of this house of God by showing faithfulness to his life's work. Although this is termed the *New* Synagogue, 140 years have elapsed since its establishment. It was denoted *New* to distinguish it from the Great and Hambro' Synagogues which had been previously built. It was originally founded in Leadenhall Street in the year 5517 (1757)* on the site occupied subsequently by Sussex Hall. The congregation

* The date 5520 (1760) given in the Introduction to the Bye-laws of the Constituents of the United Synagogue is evidently incorrect, as proved by the "Account of the ceremonial of laying the Foundation Stone of the intended New Synagogue," published in 1837.

prospered and increased rapidly, so that it was found necessary to erect a more spacious structure. The Foundation Stone of this edifice, one of the fairest, if not the fairest of the Metropolitan Synagogues, was laid by the Rev. Dr. Solomon Hirschel, on Wednesday, 5th Iyar, 5597 (May 10th, 1837). The feeling words spoken, and the brief but impressive prayer offered up by the venerable Chief Rabbi, who was then already far advanced in years, have been preserved. Zealous communal workers have worshipped here—David Salamons, the first Jewish Lord Mayor, a doughty champion in the struggle for emancipation, Sampson Lucas, one of the founders and one of the earliest presidents of the United Synagogue.

But not many years after the consecration of this building the migration to the West commenced, and with the removal of the more wealthy members, the fortunes of this house began to wane—a decadence which gave your late secretary many a heart-ache. And now it cannot be denied that a crisis has been reached in the fortunes of this congregation. And I say, unhesitatingly, it depends upon you, and you alone, members of this congregation, how this crisis is to terminate. If you will view its conditions with neglect and coldness, with lukewarm inertness, then, I say, better to close this building forthwith than to suffer it to languish

and drag on an inglorious existence. And indeed, if the East were depleted of all its Jewish indwellers, then I would maintain that closure would be the one inevitable termination of the crisis. But, seeing that tens of thousands of our brethren still reside within a short distance of this spot, it seems to me that the time for removing this edifice to another part of the metropolis has not yet arrived, if only the managers will succeed in attracting members to worship in this Synagogue and to support it with their willing offerings.

How is this end to be accomplished? We have heard this day the words of Moses' song זֶה אֵלִי וְאַנְוֵהוּ, "This is my God, I will glorify Him," or, as this last verb may also be rendered, "I will erect a habitation unto Him." The great purpose of our assembling for divine worship is to recall us again and again from the cankering anxieties and searing frets of earth by communion with God, by sincere thanksgiving, by humble and heartfelt adoration. The sanctuary should become a quiet resting-place amid the heat and burden of this great city, its wearing labour and its strife of tongues. The services should be even like a cup of cold water to the thirsty, dusty wanderer in the desert, even like unto the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

But if divine worship here is to subserve this high ideal, the services must be conducted in a

reverential, dignified fashion, with due order and decorum. The voice of conversation must be sternly repressed, and everything banished that might impair the solemnity of the service. And with this view, it is essentially needed that the voice of earnest admonition and of loving exhortation should resound within these walls, that systematic religious teaching be imparted to yourselves and to your children. It therefore seems to me that the official, whom you are called upon shortly to select, should not merely be a Reader gifted with a tuneful voice, not a mere accountant with the pen of a ready writer, but a duly trained and worthily equipped minister of God. A minister qualified to expound the written and traditional law. A minister fired with enthusiasm, who will keep alive in your hearts the thought of God, who will rebuke vice, and inspire effort, who will awaken slumbering consciences and keep before you the ideals of righteousness and of piety, the memory of death, judgment and eternity. A minister, who will not content himself with addressing you from the pulpit, but who will go up and down among the members of his flock, sympathising with their joys and sustaining them in their sorrows. A minister who will rejoice to bring your children nearer to God, who will labour actively among the ignorant and the vicious, and who will preach by means of

his life, by his unsleeping energy, his self-denying modesty and his single-minded humility.

If you will act on the lines of the counsel, which I have endeavoured thus briefly and imperfectly to lay before you, then you may hope that prosperity will again, by Divine blessing, smile upon your Synagogue. Not that prosperity only, which depends on a big roll of membership, on largeness of income, on the amount of surplus paid into the common fund ; but the success which is evidenced in the largeness of the number of attendants at your Sabbath services, shown above all in the Jewish spirit that pervades the congregants, the ready willingness with which you will make sacrifices for the sake of your religion, the sanctity you attach to Sabbath and festivals, your readiness to dedicate yourselves to the great work which Judaism has still to accomplish on earth, your fidelity to the memory of your dead, their hopes and their strivings.

Almighty and all-merciful God ! We pray unto Thee for this place of worship which is dedicated unto Thy glory. May there be peace within its walls, and devotion in the hearts of the congregants thereof. Vouchsafe Thy spirit—a spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and of godly fear—unto the wardens and managers of this congregation, so that they may administer

its affairs with zeal and discretion. Grant Thy heavenly grace unto the ministers, that they may lead those who are assembled here in the path of piety and righteousness. Inspire the worshippers with fervour, so that they may exclaim, even as did our fathers of old, וְלֹא נַעֲזוֹב אֶת בֵּית אֱלֹהֵינוּ, "We will not forsake the house of our God," we will toil for the prosperity of our Synagogue, we will join in bearing the burdens of the community, we will seek the welfare of all our brethren in this great city. To this end vouchsafe, O Lord, Thy heavenly benediction. The Lord bless you and and keep you. May the Lord cause his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. May the Lord turn his countenance unto you, and give you peace. Amen.

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